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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN REACTIONS TO THE LEBANESE CRISIS

REF: (A) VIENNA 2295 (B) VIENNA 2256

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Austrian leaders remain divided over whether the country should participate in a UN-led intervention force in Lebanon. Meanwhile, public opinion, outraged over the death of an Austrian UN observer and the civilian casualties in Lebanon, is clearly tilting against such engagement. Defense Minister Platter, reacting to calls that Austria should withdraw its peacekeeping troops altogether from the region, stressed that the country's principal commitment remains unchanged. On the diplomatic front, Austrian Foreign Minister Plassnik summoned Israel's ambassador to Austria to express her "outrage" over the killing of the UN observers. The junior coalition partner BZO and the right-wing Freedom Party have called on the GOA to "send the Israeli Ambassador home." So far, Austria has pledged 500,000 Euros in aid to Lebanon. On July 28, two demonstrations took place in Vienna against Israel's war against Lebanon. End summary.

President, Chancellor Disagree Over Intervention Force

¶2. (SBU) In an interview with the news daily "Salzburger Nachrichten" on July 25, Austrian President Heinz Fischer (SPO) said that Austria could conceivably contribute peacekeepers to a future UN-led protection force in Lebanon. Shortly afterwards, however, Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel (OVP) expressed strong reservations against such participation and said that Austria's multiple peacekeeping missions were already stretched thin due to its commitments in the Golan Heights (370 peacekeepers in UNDOF) and in the Balkans (about 800 blue helmets). Schuessel's foreign policy spokesman, Michael Spindelegger, and a chorus of other party spokespeople expressed similar reservations.

Outrage Over Death of UN Observer and Civilian Casualties

¶3. (SBU) Two recent incidents in Lebanon continue to dominate public discourse in Austria: the July 26 death of four UN peacekeepers, including 44-year-old Austrian Major Hans-Peter Lang, and the attack Sunday in Qana and the subsequent civilian casualties. (COMMENT: The GOA has not yet officially identified the body of the Austrian peacekeeper. He was part of three Austrian UNTSO monitors in South Lebanon. The UN temporarily removed the remaining two observers from their posts. END COMMENT.)

¶4. (U) Austria reacted strongly to the death of the four UN peacekeepers. Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik (OVP) called her Israeli counterpart, Tzip Livni, on July 27 and also summoned the Israeli Ambassador to Austria, Dan Ashbel, to convey the "outrage of the Austrian Government" over the "unacceptable attack." Plassnik

demanding "immediate and comprehensive clarification" of the incident. On July 31, Ashbel spoke with journalists and defended Israel's actions in Lebanon. He said the civilian deaths in Lebanon amounted to a "plus in the PR war" for Hezbollah. Ashbel held photos, according to press reporting, which he claimed showed civilian buildings in Qana being used as launch pads by Hezbollah for rocket attacks. He implied that the UN was partly to blame for the deaths of the four peacekeepers for sending unarmed observers into a war zone. He criticized the European Union for not adding Hezbollah to its terrorist list.

15. (U) On July 31, Defense Minister Guenther Platter (OVP) reacted to several statements across the political spectrum, which questioned the wisdom of Austrian participation in peacekeeping missions. He reconfirmed Austria's unwavering commitment to UN peacekeeping operations.

16. (U) Similarly, the news about civilian casualties from Israeli bomb attacks on the town of Qana triggered sharp words of criticism from the foreign ministry, as well as from the body politic and the Austrian press. FM Plassnik called the incident "inexcusable" and said she was deeply shocked by events in Qana and by the "incredible suffering of defenseless people." Plassnik added that, "it is unacceptable that Israeli air raids, whose main victim is the civilian population, are repeatedly described as errors and misunderstandings." Plassnik called for an end to the "blind violence" and appealed to both Israel and Hezbollah to cease their attacks and stop resisting international efforts for an immediate ceasefire. Plassnik will attend the ad-hoc meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on August 1.

Political Party and Jewish Community Reactions

VIENNA 00002313 002 OF 002

17. (SBU) The head of the junior coalition partner BZO, Peter Westenthaler, called the July 26 attack on the UN observer post "a detestable assassination," while de-facto BZO leader and Carinthian governor Joerg Haider railed against the U.S. and Israeli "war criminals" and called for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador to Austria. Social-democratic spokesman Caspar Einem noted that an army "capable of target killing should be able to distinguish a clearly designated UN post from a Hezbollah position." SPO MEP Hannes Swoboda attacked the U.S. for "accepting Israel's military intervention without any criticism." The right-wing opposition Freedom Party pressed the government to suspend diplomatic relations with Israel.

18. (SBU) The Austrian Jewish Community expressed "deep regret" over the "tragic accident" on July 26. In an interview with "Der Standard," Ariel Muzicant, President of the Austrian Jewish Community, fired back at the BZO and FPÖ by calling their statements against Israel a "disgrace to Austria." At the same time, Muzicant said he regretted the deaths of the UN observers and demanded a full investigation. He added that a UN presence in Lebanon, however, only made sense if it is armed and has a clear mandate.

19. (U) On July 28, hundreds of people, in two separate demonstrations, protested in Vienna against Israel and the war in Lebanon. The police, according to press reports, estimate that 900 people joined the demonstration organized by the Austrian Islamic Community. About 150 people joined a protest organized by left-wing activist Thomas Langthaler, in front of the U.S. Embassy in Vienna (Ref A).

Austrian Relief Efforts

110. (U) In other developments, the GOA last week pledged 500,000 euros in aid to Lebanon (Ref B). Austrian media are also reporting on a private Austrian-Syrian relief initiative, which a Syrian-born hospital director in Melk, Abdulrahman Aburumieh, is organizing. Aburumieh is collecting medical supplies, which Syrian Air is reportedly flying twice a week from Vienna to Damascus. According to Aburumieh, the supplies are then trucked to refugee camps in

Syria and northern Lebanon. Aburumieh, according to press reports, said there are three Austrian doctors working with the Lebanese Red Cross, the Red Crescent, and the Austrian relief organization "Hilfswerk" out of Damascus. He said his relief effort does not have access to Southern Lebanon.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Austria's outrage over the death of the four UN observers, in particular, and against the Israeli campaign in general, should be seen in the context of the country's decades-old commitment to UN peacekeeping, its proud identity as one of three UN sites, and its high regard for UN policies in general. Additionally, Austria, while carefully crafting good relations with Israel in the 1990s, has a record of pro-Palestinian/pro-Arab policies ever since the late SPO Chancellor Kreisky opened up a dialogue with the PLO in the 1970s amid international protests. These national parameters set the framework for the current political and public outrage over what a majority of Austrians increasingly sees as Israel's disproportionate campaign in Lebanon. The media, which have been particularly careful to appear non-biased so far, are increasingly embracing emotional reporting about civilian victims in Lebanon. Moreover, with the campaign for national elections October 1 around the corner, the populist parties are competing to echo public anger over the killing of the UN monitors and the latest civilian casualties in Qana.

Kilner